

ANIMALS - PLOVERS

Baby bird stops traffic

Plover hatches on beach,
vehicles are banned

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PLYMOUTH — There won't be any four-wheeling on Plymouth Long Beach for a while. Vehicle access to the beach beyond the crossover was shut down when a piping plover chick was spotted last Saturday.

The first chick hatched in the evening of May 23, just as predicted by natural resource officer Richard Souza, 34 days after the egg was laid. By Sunday its three nest mates had also joined the beachcombing crowd.

The beach and the birds, which are a threatened species, are now being moni-

tored 24 hours a day. Seasonal crews began round the clock schedules May 21.

The restrictions only affect vehicles. Other beach activities are still allowed. "I've seen a lot of walkers out there," Souza said.

Limited parking is available for some four-wheel-drive vehicles with beach stickers along the road out to the cross-over and in a newly built overnight camping lot along the road. Souza asked that drivers park carefully to make room for as many cars as possible. Drivers should also be aware that it is illegal to park on private property. Much of the land along the road is privately owned. Vehicles will not be allowed to park anywhere which might impede emergency services to the beach or to the homes of residents.

"Think before you park," Souza said.

In order to protect the plover chicks that from birth wander around the beach forag-

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ing for food, a vehicle free buffer is placed around the nest. Selectmen agreed last week to abide by a federal injunction requiring the town to follow the federal guidelines for plover monitoring and protection. The federal standard calls for a 200-meter radius around a nest with chicks that have not yet learned to fly, basically spanning the narrow beach. It usually takes from 28 to 35 days for a chick to fledge. This first nest is 136 meters north of the cross-over on the harbor edge of the dunes.

After a week of monitoring the movement of the chicks, Souza and his staff may be able to consider reducing the restricted zone down to 100 meters.

These new baby birds may be the first of the season, but they are far from alone. Souza said this week that there are now 11 plover nests on the beach stretching from the cross-over to the tip. Another four or five pairs of adult birds have not yet nested. Those late arrivals could extend vehicle restrictions into August.

Other nests established near the crossover will definitely shut down the crossover again this season, even after these first chicks have flown, Souza said.

Souza estimates that another nest of chicks will hatch within two weeks. Another group of nests

are then expected to hatch close to the same time.

The cost of a Long Beach sticker was reduced last month by selectmen from \$40 to \$25 partly because of the limits to use. Only 40 four-wheel drive Long Beach stickers have been sold so far this year. Last year 1,156 were purchased. The record was set in 1992 with 2,701 stickers sold for vehicle access to the barrier beach.

The proceeds from beach stickers go into a fund for beach maintenance and repair. Over the last couple of years the town has lost more than \$50,000 in revenue in reduced sticker sales. With the lower priced sticker, if the numbers continue to fall, so will the revenue to the fund.

Last summer, residents with four-wheel-drive vehicles protested to selectmen about extended vehicle restrictions because of the plovers. They accused park department staff of catering to the birds at the expense of beachgoers. The town's natural resource officer was fired and selectmen took up a fight to resist requirements to meet federal guidelines to protect the threatened plovers. When the battle finally ended up in court, the judge ordered Plymouth to meet the federal guidelines. The selectmen have decided not to appeal the court decision.